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Critiquing Feminism: A Transman Perspective

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Introduction

Gender equality is associated with women, feminism, and breaking down male dominance. Equality implies equalness, in this case equalness between all genders. I argue that gender equality is an umbrella topic that encompasses the feminist movement. The feminist movement has been predominantly pro women's rights. While I think their cause is just, feminism's sole focus on women simply does not encompass all genders. Therefore I use feminism/feminist to be different, and more limiting, than gender equality (and its movement).

Trans men are neglected in feminist conversation because two key identities, being a man and being transgender, are not readily included in feminism. Men and transgender people should have a voice in the gender equality movement and so should trans men whose needs intersect with men, women, and the trans community as a whole.

Trans men must navigate being transgender and (for many) being perceived as a man¹. These two intersecting identities, being transgender and a man, are limited in feminist conversation. In feminism men are seen as privileged, oppressive, and part of the patriarchy. This approach is not intersectional, limits male experiences to those of dominance, and is constrained in a gender binary. There is still debate about whether men can be feminists (Brian 2013 & Crowe 2013) and not much talk about how damaging masculinity can be (Newsom 2015). Feminism is also debating transgender inclusion, which predominantly focuses on trans women (Green 2006, Flynn 2011, Koyama 2013), and leaves out the needs of trans men.

It is always in an evolving society's best interest to identify social failings. Problems can only be solved if the problem is known. By addressing a problem, there is the hope of solution. I

¹ For my purposes, I will be talking about trans men that are perceived as men unless otherwise stated.

myself am a trans man and see the lack of representation and conversation around trans men. Gender equality includes me too, and I want to kick start the conversation of trans men inclusion by addressing some of the needs of this community. This conversation has ramifications beyond trans men because trans men's needs overlap with other genders needs and because feminism should be more inclusive.

Discussion

Who can be a Feminist

Feminism's inclusion, and its lack of, has been under scrutiny before. Feminism has been critiqued for lacking diversity. In *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* Audre Lorde (1984) lambasts a feminist conference at NYU for lacking diverse women. She states "The absence of any consideration of lesbian consciousness or the consciousness of Third world women leaves a serious gap." Lorde believes that feminists should talk about the identities of different women. Intersectionality does this by looking at interlocking identities when talking about systems of oppression and privilege (Johnson 2013). When feminism isn't intersectional, conversations are limited and marginalized groups are left disadvantaged. One disadvantaged group is trans men.

Women can be feminists. That exact definition of what a feminist can look like or list of requirements would vary depending on who is asked, but there really isn't any opposition to "women *can* be feminists." That is not the case for men and transgender people. There is debate if they can be feminist and how they might fit in feminism, and there is no well accepted answer.

In "The Roles of Men with Feminism and Feminist Theory," Brian Klocke says "Men cannot really be feminists anymore than whites can be black nationalist. However, men

can be pro-feminist and whites can be pro-black nationalists” (Klocke 2013). Klocke believes that men can learn feminism and fight for women by challenging the patriarchy. This is an example of when feminism is seen as for women, by women, and only women. Jonathan Crowe describes this as feminism focused on “knowledge and understanding of women’s experiences... [that] men cannot have” (Crowe 2013). It is seen that only women can understand women’s rights, empowerment, and have “full engagement with feminist objectives” (Crowe 2013). Having a personal stake and similar life experiences therefore makes women not only better than men at being a feminist but also implies that men cannot be true feminists, hence the idea that men can only be “profeminist.”

While Crowe does not take a clear stance on whether men can be feminist, these ideas of men’s limited involvement come up. The study “Framing Men in Feminism” interviewed men in Sweden about gender, gender equality, and “passing” as a feminist in social situations (Holmgren and Hearn 2009). Holmgren and Hearn describe Sweden as being friendly towards feminists and even conservative male leaders identify as feminists. Despite positive views towards feminisms, various men in the study had negative experiences from men and family, feeling like they could be authentic and potentially taking efforts to *not* pass as feminists.

These men also reported strained interactions with female feminists. For example, a man called Sven was stopped at the only unlocked entrance to a building and told “No, you’re not allowed in here” because a feminist group was meeting there. He ended up missing his choir practice because they would not budge despite his instance that he would quiet, respectful, and needed to go inside. Sweden, a place where the “consensus on the value of gender equality [is seen as the] political and general norm” and with 3 words to describe male feminists still limits

men's involvement in feminism.

Transgender individuals often face similar limitations and they come, at least in part, from the idea of men/masculine individuals don't belong in feminism. Eli Green's "Debating Trans Inclusion in the Feminist Movement" summarizes Janice Raymond's logic behind her disinclusion of transgender people, mostly talking about trans women (Green 2006). Raymond believes that "[trans women] are deviant men on a mission to destroy or at least usurp the success of the feminist movement." The majority of her writings and trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) in general focus on trans women and their relationship to male privilege, but there is a little on trans men as well. Raymond "[alleges] that female-bodied feminists will not identify as trans men *because they are feminists*... [and] transmen are transitioning as a means of escaping the oppression faced by women" (Green's original emphasis).

Raymond's sentiment is that trans women are deceptive men and will do harm to feminism, and that trans men are not feminists because transitioning to being a man is simply trying to bypass the oppressive experience of being a woman and gain privilege. Trans women and trans men are therefore viewed as being against what feminism stands for, women's equality due to their perceived relationship with masculinity. Raymond is what I would call a feminism purist, someone who believes feminism is only for cis women, with trans people and men having no place in feminism. The feminists who block Sven's entry in "Framing Men in Feminism" would be purists as well. Pursuits often enforce gender roles, differences, and the binary. Purists see distinct differences in the experiences of men and women (binary gender roles) and choose to focus on ciscentric womanhood.

Raymond's views about trans men leaving womanhood to avoid oppression is countered

by an excerpt from Judith Butler, who explains that Raymond's thinking is rooted in a limited view of masculinity/femininity and ignores the danger, discrimination, and vulnerability of being openly transgender. Green also brings in the viewpoint of a trans man from San Francisco, Kaisaris, who explains that he strives to be a feminist and a good man. Kaisaris embodies the idea that trans men can transition and still maintain a "feminist consciousness" with the intent of avoiding further oppression of women (Green 2006). "Feminist consciousness" is an adjective, describing a state of being/mind which is different from the noun feminist, an identity. Whether or not transgender people (or men for that matter) can be feminists, they can be a gender equalist.

Transgender Men Overlooked: Needs & Experiences

Taylor Flynn claims that "women are unlikely to be viewed as equal to men until the law recognizes that some women have penises and some men have vaginas" (Flynn 2013). By breaking down the gender binary, the gender hierarchy (male dominance over women) will also degrade. Therefore expanded transgender rights could lead to more equality for everybody. Cis women and transgender men actually have a lot of direct overlap, so by helping with one group's specific needs, the other is helped.

In general², trans men and cis women have the same reproductive parts and capabilities. Transition for trans men varies from person to person and can include social transition (name/pronouns), testosterone hormone replacement therapy (HRT), double mastectomy with nipple grafts (top surgery), removal of uterus and ovaries, and genital surgery (Providence Health Plans 2013). Many go on testosterone shots, patches, and creams to undergo nonsurgical bodily changes such as deepening of voice, growth of (facial) hair, body fat redistribution to the

² Both trans men and cis women can have internal autonomy removed, or trans men can have genital surgery creating differences

gut instead of legs/butt, and cessation of menstruation (Planned Parenthood Columbia Willamette 2016). While trans men often stop menstruating within 6 months of starting HRT treatment, testosterone does not act as a means of pregnancy prevention and Planned Parenthood says “you need to use birth control to prevent pregnancy, *just in case*” (emphasis added). So before and after starting testosterone, trans men may need access to contraceptives and abortion services as well as mammograms and pap smears like cis women do.

Trans men can and may want to give birth but face social and medical barriers. Thomas Beatie and Andy Inkster are trans men who have given birth and have faced these barriers (Cascio 2014). Both had trouble with finding a fertility clinic to help them, with Inkster being asked for a therapist's letter to verify his “emotional readiness” for pregnancy. Beatie, known as the “Pregnant Man,” has had problems being legally recognized as a man in Arizona because he has given birth. Because of this, he could not divorce his wife because the state did not recognise same sex marriages.

Another medical barrier is the decision to go through hormone replacement therapy. HRT can affect fertility but fertility can be preserved by freezing eggs, embryos, and ovarian tissues (Gorton 2005). The problem with that is insurance doesn't always cover fertility preservation. For example my health insurance, Providence Health Plans, does not cover any fertility preservation, sperm, eggs, embryos, etc. because it is classified as “experimental and investigational” (Providence Health Plan 2013). This means that a trans man may, and other trans people considering HRT treatment, have to choose between furthering their transition and being able to have biological kids. Insurance needs for trans men and cis women concerning reproduction overlap.

To fight and expand trans men's reproductive rights, is to expand cis women's reproductive rights as well. Another example involves when tampons and pads are taxed as luxury items. Both cis women and trans men who have periods pay the price, literally. The state of California alone receives "over \$20 million annually" from taxing period hygiene products³. Changing sale tax law to exempt period products because it is a basic necessity would benefit cis women and trans men's wallets.

Speaking of wallets, let's talk about wage equality. Cis women get paid less than cis men. A study from the Pew Research Center compared (cis) men and women of different races to take an intersectional look at the pay gap in the United States (Patten 2016). A white man is used as the standard (100%) and Asian men earn 117% of what a white man makes. Asian women make 87%, white women make 82%, black women make 65% and hispanic women make 58% of what a white man makes. Meanwhile black men make 73% and hispanic men make 58% of what a white man makes. All of these are cis men and women and everyone except Asian men earn less than white men.

Transgender men and women's pay can change after they transition. According to a study by Schilt and Wiswall, trans women have "significant losses in hourly earnings" while trans men "experience no change in earnings or a small positive increase" after coming out and transitioning (Schilt and Wiswall 2008). Schilt and Wiswall focus on trans women's wage change because it is drastic in its own right and drastic when compared to trans men's wage change, which is minimal.

Because trans men's pay doesn't change or even increases slightly, their pay change is

³ I am purposely avoiding using "feminine hygiene product" because it implies periods are womanly. I have personally had to get products from the "feminine hygiene" aisle, which was awkward and dysphoric.

mostly ignored but trans men's pay pretransition is not taken into account. Pre transition working as "women," trans men made 13-42% less than white men (Patten 2016) which means post transition numbers are about the same. Trans men's wages should be thought of when thinking and talking about wage inequality. This is because they make about the same or a little bit more than the cis women who want equal pay and because trans women are not the only ones with wage problems in the transgender community.

Unfortunately, trans men often take a role of less importance when compared to trans women. There are times when talking more about trans woman than trans men makes sense because they have 2 very different narratives. Data analysis by Schilt and Westbrook of media reporting transgender murders found that 95% of the homicides were men who killed trans woman, with 65% of the perpetrators feeling "tricked into homosexuality" (Schilt & Westbrook 2009). Trans women took focus in this analysis because there were only 3 cases (1.91%) where trans men were murdered. The threat of being murdered was greater for trans women and so it made sense to focus on them. Focusing on trans women concerning pay change seems to make sense at first glance, when looking at net change, but not putting trans men's pay change into context⁴ at all is unfair and irksome.

There are other times a narrow focus on trans women takes place at the expense of trans men. Emi Koyama is a trans woman who brings up the idea of being a "transfeminist," (Koyama 2001). Koyama defines transfeminism as a movement of and for trans women who link their "liberation to the liberation of all women and beyond." "The Transfeminist Manifesto" is geared for transwomen in the feminist movement, which is limiting but understandable because it is

⁴ Having wages comparable to cis women.

Koyama's view point and she is a trans woman. I still find it strange that Koyama has an entire section about "Health and Reproduction" that does not include trans men. When talking about having children in this section, Koyama likens trans women "obtaining underground hormones [and] traveling overseas for sex reassignment surgery" to the fear of women returning to "unsafe underground abortions."

Koyama wrote a postscript about this manifesto for *Catching A Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*. In it she spoke about her decision to focus on trans women and that her exclusion of trans men was due to a desire to keep (cis) men from "exploiting" feminism (Koyama 2001). Koyama said:

"I take full blame for the fact that this manifesto is heavily focused on issues male-to-female transsexual people face, while neglecting unique struggles that female-to-male trans people⁵ and other transgender and genderqueer people face. At the time I wrote this piece, I felt the need to restrict the focus of feminism to "women" because I feared that expanding the focus would permit non-trans men to exploit feminism for their interest, as some so-called men's rights groups do. While I still feel that this fear is justified, I now realize that privileging transsexual women's issues at the expense of other trans and genderqueer people was a mistake."

Because trans men are men, Koyama didn't want to talk about them because that would open the doors for men in feminism. Her approach was based in keeping men's rights groups out of feminism, which also endorses men in general having limited feminism involvement and kept her from talking about trans men's gender equality needs.

Another section of Koyama's paper addresses trans women and male privilege. Male privilege and binary transgender people⁶ comes up often. The argument concerning trans men is

⁵ Male-to-Female is also abbreviated MTF and is generally considered a synonym for transwomen. Female-to-Male is abbreviated FTM and is generally considered a synonym for transmen.

⁶ Binary transgender refers to people whose identities are within the gender binary (male/female).

that they are men and therefore have male privilege, which negates the fact that the privilege depends on passability and that navigating life as man is no walk in the park.

When a trans man doesn't pass they are seen as deviating from gender norms and can face discrimination because of this, but when trans men pass as men, they can have male privilege. This privilege can be dependent on whether someone is out or stealth⁷. When someone is stealth, they are assumed to be cisgender and have cisgender privilege. Cis gender privilege is different from male privilege, but both contain privilege for being part of the dominant group. Johnson says that "cisgender privilege is given to persons whose morphology aligns with socially-sanctioned gender categories... [and receive] unearned privileges for the ways their bodies and identities align" (Johnson 2013). Being visibly transgender opens the door for discriminations due to their gender identity. So while a trans man can have male privilege, they do not have cisgender privilege. If they go stealth, they still do not have cisgender privilege because being outed is still a threat.

When a trans man is perceived as a man, there can still be danger because of the way men interact with each other. "Dangerous Privilege: Trans Men, Masculinities, and Changing Perceptions of Safety" is a research paper that explored trans men's experience navigating the violence of the male world (Abelson 2014). Abelson says that in all categories except rape and sexual assault, men experience higher rates of violent victimization than women and men often use violence to show their masculinity. The interviews showed that many trans men faced threats of and actual violence from men and due to being socialized as "women" in their youth, they did not know how to respond. One interviewed trans man sarcastically called his "privilege" after

AKA trans men/FTM and trans women/MTF.

⁷ Stealth refers to a trans person who lives daily life as the gender they pass as and refrains from being out. This can be for safety or for comfort reasons.

transition “the privilege of male violence” (Abelson 2014). Another trans man specifically felt the need to tell his son not to call him “mom” in the men’s restroom because he was afraid of getting his “ass kicked.”

Being a man is no walk in the park, for trans or for cis men. There are unique bias that come into play that are not often addressed. One of the few groups talking about those needs are men’s rights groups, but men’s rights groups are not encouraging positive changes. Men’s rights groups are often misogynistic, woman hating, and self centered. They’d rather their needs be a priority and trash those who are opposite to them, which includes women and feminists, but the question arises about what do we do when they have some valid points? An opinion article by Sam Glover discusses this dichotomy of men having unmet, gender related, needs but also engaging in hate against women (Glove 2017).

In “Men Need an Alternative to the Toxic Men’s Rights Movement,” Glover admits men rights have some legitimate concerns like the how social barriers exist to getting mental health help and how some boys are left alone when struggling in school, but doesn’t approve of their actions. He condemns the hate filled speech against women and feminist, disapproves of them taking statistics out of context, and claims that men right’s groups are looking to “beat down feminists... rather than [promote] the interests of men.”

I agree that these men’s rights groups are more hateful than helpful and that there should be an alternative space that is helpful. Men’s rights groups want their needs at the cost of much of feminism’s gains. This is based in retaliation, not for the good of men. To want this change to spite feminists achievements instead of for a higher quality of life and to do so in such offensive ways is distasteful, to say the least. But, when men expect their gain to be women’s total loss is

when they become hypocritical. There may be times when men's gain takes something from feminism, but the goal should be *balance* not tipping the odds in your favor. Because of this mentality, men's rights groups are hypocritical when they pursue "social change" to dominate rather than equalize.

To call men rights movement hypocritical for disregarding balance but to not address feminist hypocrisy in this topic would make me a hypocrite. I am not attacking feminists nor do I mean malice. That is not my intent, and I will not repeat anything vile like the men before me have. I simply believe that feminism's core is equality and that ignoring the valid points about what many men are experiencing is hypocritical. I know that hate is spewed again and again from these men's rights group. If feminism were to acknowledge these issues I think 2 things would happen. The first is that the feminist movement would move closer to true equality and balance.

Nancy Levit's law review shows historical cases with male plaintiffs who challenged the limitations on men's experienced (Levit 2008). Prior to the 20th century men retained custody of children, until it switched to predominantly woman retaining custody. Women got parental rights, but it was not equal and balanced. Levit says that within the past 3 decades states have "abandoned... the *formal presumption* in favor of mothers ... nevertheless, decisions favor mothers in a number of ways" (emphasis added). Fathers are discouraged from seeking parental rights, are portrayed as being less loving, and when custody judgements are made, fathers are thought of as a collective instead of as individuals with unique circumstances. Of all court decided custody hearings, 50% awarded the mother sole custody while only 21% awarded the father sole custody (Levit 2008).

A male acquaintance of mine, Andrew⁸, has been fighting for custody of his daughter. The mother would hit Andrew and when the police would be called, they would say there was nothing they could do and leave. Andrew once hit her back and found himself arrested. He tried to get custody of their daughter, but was unsuccessful. The mother, a woman who beat the father of her child, has custody. Andrew shows that there is more work to be done, particularly in the real world because there are real world consequences. Andrew was failed by the police and the court. His abuse was invalidated because he was a man being beaten by a woman. The narrative of women facing abuse is important, but it is not the only one. Andrew doesn't have custody of his kid because he defended himself. Instead, the kid is with a woman who has shown a pattern of abuse. These actions failed him because there was gender bias against him for being a man and this also failed the daughter by limiting her interactions with a loving and caring father.

Secondly, I think acknowledgement (and possibly actions) could help uproot the hate in men's rights groups. By addressing the problem and possibly working towards a solution, you take the power away from these negative men. They can lose their appeal. When the problem is addressed, it no longer fuels the fire. There isn't a day in sight where some men's groups won't have hate messages, but feminists can hopefully address men's problems, destabilize these hateful groups, and have an intact moral compass by avoiding being hypocrites.

Why am I going on about (cis) men so much in a trans men paper? The short answer is because I feel the consequences. Completely invalidating men's groups invalidates my parts of my experiences as a man. If I have an issue and it relates to me identifying as a man, I don't feel comfortable speaking out because it does not seem acceptable to do so. When I'm told to "man

⁸ Pseudonym for anonymity

up,” I don’t know what to do. It is an unfair standard that I must hide my fear, anxiety, and tears. I see toxic masculinity, which is being addressed by some of the feminist community in what Connell calls “feminism [challenging] existing gender arrangements” (Connell 2001), but that doesn’t translate into the real world bias and problems.

Becoming a Visible Man by Jamison Green talks about his transition and life. A power part of his book is when he talks about his all male singing group. The men in this group would talk about their problems, which included not having parental rights and not being able to see their kids. When Green finally comes out to the groups and talks about not seeing the kids his former partner birthed and he feels father too, everyone accepts him and validates his loss. He is a trans man who had limited rights with one child and none with the other. The bias against men also affect Green, a trans men.

Transitioning for me means seeing all of what “being a man” is and being placed in a box emotionally and in social situations. I am transgender, but I see and one day may experience the specific things that men’s rights group “advocate” for, so I want to advocate for men. Where I feel there is need and disadvantage I shall go; my conscious bids me. I do not excuse the hate, but I shall rise above it and hope you can find it within yourself to do the same. No matter the gender, injustice deserves action.

Conclusion/Reflection

Gender equality is an overarching desire that includes the feminist movement as well genders that the feminism often leaves out. To be a feminist is seen as to be exclusively pro women. Meanwhile, gender equality is about finding balance and equality for all genders. Gender equality is for cis women, trans women, trans men, cis men, non binary folk, and all

other possible genders. Getting to a state of equalness is hard, if such a state is even possible. Finding balance involves listening to all parties and acknowledging each other's struggles.

Feminism and men's rights groups need to learn this. Meninists favor themselves and don't want to listen to others. Feminism should be more inclusive, and even if the feminist is a purist, she should still acknowledge the struggles and bias that other genders face. I hope that feminism will grow into something bigger, and be term worthy of being synonymous with gender equality. If certain feminists do not want to look outside cis women in their activism, I will respect that. I just hope that they will not stand in the way of men and trans people as the balance shifts away from women towards men and trans people in the areas that will better equalize society.

Men need help with dismantling toxic masculinity, expanding their paternal rights, and need their pain and abuse to be acknowledged and changed. The place to find support for these problems and bias that men face are within hateful menimist groups. Men either embrace the hateful and vindictive men's rights groups or are minimized. By not wanting to engage with the negativity towards woman and not having a space to talk or further change against these bias, these men end up in no man's land. I fall into this territory. I don't want to be hateful and full of malice. I don't think that women and feminists, or really anyone, deserves that. When there is limited or no space to talk about these unaddressed needs men may feel like it's one or the other, expressing their needs in hateful ways or suppressing them. Creating an environment to talk about these issues will hopefully lessen the appeal and numbers of negative men's rights groups while encouraging social change. It should be remembered that to be pro men is not to be anti women; the two are not inherently linked.

Trans people have needs that overlap with those of other genders but also face unique problems such as those that arise from the lack of cis privilege. The bathroom, locker room, and sports debate is one such issue. Trans high school wrestler Mack Beggs was unable to compete within the boys wrestling tournaments, and had to compete against girls despite starting testosterone HRT (Domonoske 2017). Beggs won the Texas 6A girls state tournament, which has caused some outrage. It's ironic because the anti-trans policy was suppose to keep "boys" (trans girls) from competing against cis girls but created a situation where Beggs, a (trans) boy, only option to compete was against cis girls.

Trans men are often ignored by feminists. Feminism not including transgender people and men, leaves trans men in a rarely talked about position and if they are a part of discussions, trans men often take a back seat to the needs of trans women. In addition, when there are similar needs to cis women, trans men aren't included and the language use to describe situations trans men and cis women both face is femininely gendered. Menstruation and pregnancy are talked about as a part of "womanhood," but are also concerns for trans men as well.

Martin Luther King Jr. said that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (King 1963). Meanwhile, Audre Lorde has claimed that "there is no hierarchy of oppression" (Lorde 1984). While both of these social justice icons were black and were at least in part talking about race, the sentiments apply to other social justice issues, including gender. Following King's logic, I propose a similar statement that unaddressed inequality for one gender is a threat to the equality movement as a whole. I believe that giving one group equal rights is beneficial to others as well and having the space to talk about our different problems creates room for beneficial solutions. Lorde's view of oppression is that it is incomparable to a different

experience of oppression. Like apples and oranges, transgender experiences of oppression is vastly different from race based oppression, but Lorde does not place certain oppression as more/less normal or valid .

Experiencing and fighting injustice should create a shared bond with the goal of ending oppression for all parties. Lugones and Spelman have written about how feminists that are white women and feminists that are women of color can go about joining together in theory and movement in respectful ways (Lugones & Spelman, 1983). White women, having the privilege of education and whiteness, were told to be active in learning about women of color and to try and understand the people and cultures. The goal is joint work, coming together to theorize, but to do that the privileged should listen to these new experiences because “only then can ... [there be engaging] mutual dialogue” (Lugones & Spelman, 1983).

I would like to apply this design to cis women and transgender men concerning feminism and gender equality. Feminism, the main stage for gender equality discussions, has been lacking in conversation geared towards trans men. We are not at the point of mutual conversation, but feminists can prepare for such an intersectional conversation by educating themselves. Education and inclusion is the direction we should be heading; I wish to see more of myself in gender equality around. I hope that people will start recognizing these needs and encouraging conversations about these topics, if not working on actual change. Gender equality is a work in progress. To continue progress, people of various genders, identities, and backgrounds should converse about how to find balance that addresses different groups' needs and better our society. Hopefully (feminist) conversations will not leave trans men, and other groups in need, out in the future.

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